

Sacramento Bee

Steve Wiegand: GOP budget ideas put Dems on defense

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Published 12:00 am PDT Saturday, May 10, 2008

Anyone who enjoys cagey politicking should doff his or her cap to California's Republican legislators.

That's because the Reeps have been very impressive lately in maneuvering their Democratic counterparts into a corner in this year's dance over the state budget.

As we all know, Republicans make up just 39.1 percent of the Legislature, and have no illusions of increasing that percentage anytime soon. Moreover, they've been a minority for more than a decade.

Traditionally, the Reeps have been content to just say no when it comes to the budget. As one of the very few substantive legislative processes in which they matter (because of the state Constitution's two-thirds-vote- for-passage requirement), I suspect some of them actually look forward to budget time.

They can rise to their feet, sputter pious conservative maxims about "a penny saved is a penny earned" and "it's not a revenue problem, it's a spending problem," and then vote no.

Last year, Senate Republicans held out for 52 days beyond the July 1 start of the fiscal year, marking the 16th time in the past 20 years the budget has been late. In return for their holdout, they got an additional \$700 million in cuts by the governor that they had sought, enmity from editorial writers and Democrats, and a propagation of the belief that the only positive thing about Republican lawmakers is negative.

But this year, the Reeps have taken a different, much more proactive tack.

Thrice in the past few weeks, they've come out with what they say are budget-balancing proposals that don't involve raising taxes.

In late April, they rolled out a plan to restore about half the \$4.8 billion reduction for K-12 education programs that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger proposed in January.

The GOP plan would use unspent money in some programs, shift money from public transit and cut social welfare programs to pay for the schools, while forgetting about cost-of-living raises for teachers.

A few days later, it was a package of regulatory breaks for businesses, pitched as an economic stimulus effort that would increase tax revenue without increasing rates.

This week, the Reeps proposed a series of government "reforms," which included allowing public agencies to sidestep the use of unionized labor if they could get the services cheaper from other sources, selling off surplus state property and speeding up construction projects that use already-approved bond funds.

"When times are tough, we need to make sure every tax dollar gets the greatest bang for the buck," said GOP Senate Leader Dave Cogdill of Modesto. "We encourage our Democratic colleagues to seriously consider our ideas."

That isn't likely. But the Reeps' proactive approach has left the Dems scrambling to put together their own approach to closing what could be a \$20 billion gap in a \$101 billion spending plan.

So far, the best the Dems have come up with is to start, and then embarrassedly abandon, an odious recall campaign against Republican Sen. Jeff Denham of Atwater.

Oh yeah, they've also done a lot of cluck-clucking about how the budget gap can't be closed without a tax increase or three, while muttering only vaguely about from whose pockets the extra dough should emanate.

This year's race to get a budget done has some added pressure, since the state's bean counters say we'll be out of cash sometime in the summer and need to borrow money at high interest rates to stay afloat.

That makes the Reeps' early gambits to paint the Dems in a corner even more effective.

And that has to be more fun than just saying no.
